

## A positive message skewed

It's difficult for anyone on The Free Press editorial board to make an argument against intergovernmental cooperation in these fiscally perilous times.

That's why it was surprising to many, not just us, that North Mankato city leaders used a full page in the city newsletter to voice their objections to recent editorials on the topic of cooperation.

The city took issue with two editorials in The Free Press. One was titled "Let's move ahead on strategic plan," and the other was part of our ongoing "Community Development Initiative" that suggests ways the community can be improved.

The central focus of the first editorial was on the city of Mankato's strategic plan, where we quoted City Manager Pat Hentges saying governments " would be wise to work together."

We noted North Mankato had "flatly rejected" a Mankato report showing a combined Mankato/North Mankato could save taxpayers money. We alluded to the resistance of such a bold plan but suggested a more "palatable" plan would be for the cities to work together.

"It's not about merging," we wrote, "it's about talking, cooperating, discussing. In these tough economic times for cities and government in general, unwillingness to even discuss joint solutions to common problems is not a position that serves taxpayers."

North Mankato apparently took issue with this statement and noted they cooperate and collaborate with many entities on a number of projects. They go on to list the projects.

That's fair enough, but most of the projects listed did not involve combining government services with another entity in a way that really saves taxpayers a substantial amount of money. Those that did save money, like a joint wastewater treatment plant, have been in place for years.

North Mankato pulled out of Greater Mankato Growth, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and long ago, the regional library system, all projects that called for additional, some say unnecessary, use of North Mankato taxpayer money.

That was our point, and apparently it was not clear to officials in North Mankato.

The city also took issue with another passing reference in another editorial on Aug. 8 that simply suggested two visitor guides, one for Greater Mankato and one for North Mankato, would potentially "muddy the local message on sports events."

We went on to say we hope a "discussion can take place on how the main goal of attracting visitors to the entire region can be achieved in a cooperative way."

That didn't seem controversial when we wrote it, but apparently it was. North Mankato notes The Free Press handles advertising for the Greater Mankato visitors guide.

That's not a secret. Our logo is emblazoned on the cover because it's a joint project. And it has no bearing on the editorial board decisions. We don't sell the advertising and don't concern ourselves with it on the editorial board.

North Mankato further notes that we should have disclosed in that editorial that Publisher Jim Santori is on the GMG board. That is true, and Santori is also on our editorial board.

But intergovernmental cooperation is not exactly an idea that is exclusive to the GMG board. It's something lots of our readers would like to see.

So we weren't promoting a policy of GMG, in which case disclosure would have certainly been more relevant.

Finally, we feel we need to prod the North Mankato City Council a bit because we've heard from citizens that they need prodding on the issue of more cooperation with other government entities. We also witnessed at least one meeting where residents showed up to participate in discussion and were treated — let's just say — less than hospitably.

We're happy to take criticism and, in fact, make it part of our daily business as we publish dozens of letters to the editor and online comments criticizing our operation. We're happy to look at ourselves and consider seriously constructive criticism.

We think citizens would like to see that also from elected officials who are obligated to listen to their concerns and consider their criticism.

Maybe the next North Mankato city newsletter can carry letters to the editor.

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